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'We are not communists': Castillo seeks to allay fears in divided Peru

By Stefanie Eschenbacher and Marco Aquino

Peru's presidential candidate Pedro Castillo addresses supporters from the headquarters of the "Free Peru" party in Lima, Peru, June 15, 2021.

REUTERS/Sebastian Castaneda

LIMA, June 16 (Reuters) - Pedro Castillo, a former teacher and political outsider on the verge of being named president of Peru, has looked to temper fears in the divided Andean nation after a slow vote count showed him winning the June 6 ballot.

Socialist Castillo on Tuesday claimed victory in the election, though his right-wing rival Keiko Fujimori has not conceded, alleging fraud with little evidence and seeking to get votes annulled. The electoral body has yet to confirm the result.

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"The Peruvian people have raised their heads to say democratically we are going to save this country," Castillo told cheering supporters from a balcony late on Tuesday.

The abrupt rise of 51-year-old Castillo has rattled Peru's political establishment and could have a major impact on the vital mining industry in the world's No.2 copper producer, with Castillo planning sharp tax hikes on the sector.

In the capital Lima, fears have spread among the city's small but powerful urban elite about the policies of the little-known leftist, whose Free Peru party espouses Marxist ideas but who himself has looked to moderate his rhetoric.

"We are not Chavistas, we are not communists, no one has come to destabilize this country," he said, a reference to a common refrain from Fujimori's party and supporters comparing him to Venezuela's late leftist President Hugo Chavez.
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"We are workers, we are entrepreneurs and we will guarantee a stable economy, respecting private property, respecting private investment and above all respecting fundamental rights, such as the right to education and health."

Castillo, who gained prominence as a teachers' union leader in the rural north, said his government would serve both the voters in wealthy areas who rallied behind Fujimori and his rural base in Peru's "furthest corners."

Fujimori pledged on Tuesday to keep fighting and "defend Peru's democracy." She hoped the result would swing her way once ballots that her party is seeking to annul had been checked, although election observers have said that the process appeared clean.

Her supporters are planning a march later on Wednesday.

Peru's electoral oversight body said it would confirm the result once it had resolved all appeals and requests for annulment. In previous Peruvian elections the announcement took until late June, even with fewer contested ballots.

'BATTLE BEGINS'

Castillo addressed the uncertainty over those claims and called on Peruvians to "remain vigilant" of attempts to destabilize the country's democracy. He called on the electoral body to "respect the popular will of this country."

He said Peru needed to rally together to get beyond what has become the world's deadliest per capita outbreak of COVID-19 and heal more entrenched rifts of poverty and inequality.

Healing divisions will not prove easy, however. Neither Castillo or Fujimori had been most Peruvians' first choice candidate. In a fragmented first-round election in April, neither got over 20% of the vote.

Alfredo Rodriguez, a plumber who now knocks on doors in the working class Lima district of Callao to beg for rice and potatoes, said many people were disillusioned by both candidates. He did not vote for either, he said.

Rosario Llanos, a manager, was waiting at a public health clinic in Lima on Wednesday. She cast her vote for Fujimori although she was not initially her preferred choice and was now concerned about rising tensions.

"We Peruvians have spent so many years working to finally achieve political stability," Llanos, 44, said. "With the comments both candidates are now making, they're only creating more instability."

"You can't even talk to a friend if you don't know how he or she voted because it could result in an argument."